

Encounters of US State Violence at the Border: Separation, Confinement, and Punishment of Central American Asylum-Seeking Nuclear Families

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Guest post by Sara Riva, PhD candidate at the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department at The Ohio State University. Her project examines Central American asylum-seeking women at the US-Mexico border with specific focus on confinement. Her research interests include transnational feminism, migration, punishment, and border abolition.

A woman (I will call her María, although she is a compilation of experiences of the women I have met seeking asylum), her husband, her 18-year-old son, her 11-year-old daughter, and her underage sister traveled to the US fleeing from the violence of El Salvador. Once at the US-Mexico border they were separated by the Border Patrol Officers who locked María and her daughter in a temporary holding cell before transferring them to an immigration detention center.

I met María while I was volunteering for a non-profit organization in an immigration detention center in Texas, USA. In this post, I will tell her story. But María is just one case among the thousands (there is no official data) of Central American women, who have arrived at the US Southwestern border since the summer of 2014 and have subsequently been held in detention centres together with their children. As there is no official data as to how many people are detained in the three-existing family detention centres in the US, it is difficult to measure the extent of this practice. However, when I conducted fieldwork in 2016 in the biggest one of them—which has a capacity of 2,400 beds—it was always almost at its maximum capacity. On March 27, 2018, it had 2,000 women and children confined.

The number of family units—the term the US government uses to describe a mother traveling with children—crossing the Southern border to seek asylum in the US reached a peak of 77,674 in 2016. Many of these heteronuclear families get separated once they cross the border. For example, María and her underage child were considered a 'family unit' by the authorities. As the rest of the family—underage sister, husband, and 18-year-old son—were not deemed part of this unit, they were taken to different immigration detention centers. This policy prompts the question: Why would a country whose rhetoric favors heteronuclear families—considering them the pillar of society—resort to the immediate

separation of its members?



A TEMPORARY HOLDING CELL COMMONLY KNOWN AS HIELERA (PHOTO: ERIC GAY)



[HTTP://WWW.PHOENIXNEWTIMES.COM/NEWS/IMMIGRANTS-CAUGHT-AT-BORDER-MISTREATED-IN-HOLDING-CELLS-LAWSUIT-SAYS-7401983](http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/immigrants-caught-at-border-mistreated-in-holding-cells-lawsuit-says-7401983)

María and her daughter were locked up in a temporary holding cell commonly known as *hielera*, the Spanish name for ‘ice-box’ due to the low temperatures in the living compartments. Often guards insulted some of the women through racial slurs, telling them that the temperature was that cold in order to kill the germs they were carrying into the US. During her time at the *hielera*, María never received any information regarding the amount of time they would be detained. They had to sleep on the floor of a crowded cell where there was no privacy to go to the toilet. At a certain point María got separated from her daughter for hours without any explanation and without being told for how long they would be kept apart. It was hard to sleep, not only due to the cold temperatures of the cell and the lack of blankets, but also because the guards regularly brought all the women out of the cell to ‘count’ them. Women of color who cross the border, are perceived to be deviant, opportunistic mothers who irresponsibly risk the lives of their children to enter the US and take advantage of the system. Thus, when María and other women like her enter the US, they set foot in a racialized system where their bodies are already packed with meaning. The *hieleras* become the site where punishing these women becomes ‘acceptable’, ‘deserved’, and normalized.

Once in the detention center, María was held until completion of her ‘Credible Fear Interview’—an interview where an asylum officer verifies whether María had legitimate reasons to flee her country. The outcome of the interview determines whether asylum seekers are let in the US to start their legal process to be recognized as refugees, or deported back home. It is hard to know the exact number of days María and her daughter were held. They arrived late one night and the lights were always kept on in the cells, causing her to lose sense of time. The average holding-time in the *hieleras* is two days, but there have been reports of people who have been held there for over ten days. One evening, they were eventually taken out of the cell and transferred to what is euphemistically referred to as a ‘Family Residential Center’. During her detention, María did not hear anything about her son, her sister, or her husband. She was, however, able to buy a phone card and call back home.



Without legal assistance, María's chances of getting a positive outcome on her 'Credible Fear Interview' were scant, as women who have experienced stress in their lives have a hard time confiding their traumatic experiences to a stranger. However, the non-profit organization working in the detention center helped

María prepare for the interview and the asylum-officer believed she had legitimate reasons to leave her country. She and her daughter were released but because she had no money to pay the bond (that currently can range between US\$1,500 and US\$6,000), she had to leave the detention center wearing an ankle monitor. However, she later found out that her husband had been deported to El Salvador and it took her even longer to find out her son and her sister's whereabouts.

Similar to other Western countries, the legitimacy of the US' asylum-seeking process should be questioned. María's experience of separation, lock up, and punishment raises many issues such as the ways in which the US as a signatory country of the 1967 Refugee Protocol does not comply with its legal—and moral—obligations, or the ways in which punishment is enacted on women and children at the border—as described above. Like many other signatory countries of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the US should be held accountable for detaining asylum-seekers. The confinement of asylum-seekers is legitimized through a securitization rhetoric, which holds that migrants and refugees represent a risk to Western security, culture, and economy. It is a system that helps (white) citizens sleep at night thinking that their borders are kept secure from outside threats. However, the disconnect between the rhetoric of the importance of heteronuclear families as a core American value and the practices that take place at the border—with heteronuclear families—evidences how racialization becomes an exclusionary organizing principle inside the border limits.

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